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GUEST EDITORIAL

White backlash in the 'post-racial' United States

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From the 'Reagan Revolution' to the election of Obama in the USA; from the populism of Enoch Powell and Thatcher to the rise of the British National Party in the UK; and from the backlash against multiculturalism in both Australia and Canada, westernized nations with colonial histories and unequal relations between a powerful white class and a subjugated non-white class now witness a strikingly adamant discourse and movement: growing numbers of white people claim that they are racially oppressed and seek redress against policies, laws and practices that they believe discriminate against them. I critically examine the white backlash in the 'post-racial' era (1960s – present) of the USA by reviewing the extant scholarship on the white backlash, by highlighting landmark legal cases and media spectacles that represent claims of white racial victimization, and by arguing that white victimization discourse is an integral mechanism in the formation of contemporary white racial identity.

Keywords: affirmative action; backlash; identity; politics; racism; whiteness

Introduction

In the key text *White Backlash and the Politics of Multiculturalism* (2005, 5), Roger Hewitt defines the white backlash as:

> Negative reactions within white communities to (1) the proximity of black communities following migration, or (2) the potential acquisition of new power and/or status by blacks, or (3) the fashioning of policies or legislation to bring about greater equality between "racial"/ ethnic groups, or (4) the enforcing of such policies or legislation.

Backlashes are not atomistic or static events. Together they serve as crucial mechanisms in the reproduction of racial inequality. But even a supposedly singular backlash protest, legal case or media narrative can have a cumulative effect that can reproduce 'social divisions and redistribute social status… that persist long after the initial episode has run its course' (Garland 2008, 16). Towards this end, Longazel (2013, 99) contends that a white backlash takes on the character of a 'moral panic' within the 'context of racial stratification' and is a phrase that signals the attempt by whites to hoard resources and denigrate non-whites.

The white backlash and its variations have been sewn together by the narrative that non-white success is purposefully engineered at the expense of white sacrifice. While this story is not new (e.g. white disapproval of newly elected black congressmen during Reconstruction or whites' resistance towards the civil rights movement), the past half century of white backlash has been propelled by numerous factors: deindustrialization and the shrinking number of blue-collar jobs historically available to whites (Hewitt 2005; Rhodes 2010); both the covert and explicit use of racism in politics to fracture and

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realign voting behaviour along racial lines (Hughey and Parks 2014); the rise and celebration of multiculturalism (Embrick 2011; Embrick and Rice 2010); and the nature of international transmigration and neo-liberalism that propelled a hyper-individualist and laissez-faire approach to economic and social welfare policies (Reed 2013). These changes have played out differently over three distinct eras of white backlash.

Variations of the white backlash

George Wallace and his 1963 'Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever' speech marks a key moment in the first wave of the modern white backlash. The 1960s and 1970s articulated an unambiguous conflation of the white worker as the deserving first-class citizen who was unfairly put upon by people of colour's demands for equal resources and opportunities. In this stage, many reacted violently and overtly in their opposition to the overt talk of structural racial inequalities that should be addressed via programmes like bussing or affirmative action. Michael Omi (1991, 78) writes that the civil rights movement:

> …ushered in a period of desegregation efforts, "equal opportunity" mandates, and other state reforms. By the early seventies… a "backlash" could be discerned to the institutionalization of these reforms and to the political realignments set in motion in the 1960s.

For many, these programmes were interpreted as unfair handouts to a dark and dangerous underclass that possessed neither the moral compass nor the resources to use them correctly.

The second wave of the 1980s, marked by the rise of Reagan and Thatcher, tempered the backlash rhetoric by relying on the principles of individualism and abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2013) rather than direct claims of anti-white victimization. That is, US legal and policy discourse began to abandon its focus on structural inequality and replaced it with supposed colour-blind attention to the individual. While colour-blind on the surface, this shift was predicated on an implicitly racialized new social contract between the state, the white individual and the non-white group (Rhodes 2010, 79). With domestic non-whites and non-white immigrants already understood as pathological or dysfunctional groups, the neo-liberal laws and policies reframed affirmative action, bussing or social welfare as 'group entitlement' programmes that were little more than 'handouts' paid for by hard-working (white) individuals.

The second wave reverberated into the 1990s against the celebration of multiculturalism and the clash of unequal race relations. Unlike the backlash of the 1980s, the 1990s backlash reflects a more complex response by working-class whites at a time when middle-class concerns about racial inclusion, diversity and multiculturalism on the one hand, and racial conflict and fatigue over the discussion of race on the other, dominated national political agendas. As Jennifer Fuller (2006, 167, 169) writes:

> In the 1990s, fears of racial fracture and desires for racial reconciliation converged…. Clearly the nineties was not the first era in which people feared the nation was somehow "falling apart."… The rediscovery of racism and a racial divide between blacks and whites threatened America's new sense of itself as a successfully integrated nation.

As resource allocation and policies created in the 1960s were under attack, many among the left, reacting to centuries of Eurocentric dominance, began to argue that employment and education should recognize non-white ethnic and racial traditions that had been

previously excluded or marginalized. Accordingly, many whites lashed back against this newfound 'identity politics' due to a feeling that they were either cultureless (Hewitt 1996; Hughey 2012) or their own Anglo traditions were under assault and now lacked political recognition (Rhodes 2010). Accordingly, Abby Ferber (2000, 31) wrote: 'Central to this backlash is a sense of confusion over the meanings of both masculinity and whiteness, triggered by the perceived loss of white, male privilege.' Also, Charles Gallagher (1995, 169) found that backlash-fuelled anger characterized the feelings of many white US college students: '… many whites see themselves as victims of the multicultural, pc, feminist onslaught… [and this] would be laughable if it were not for the sense of mental crisis and the reactionary backlash that underpin these beliefs.' And David Savran (1998, 4) observed that the 1990s ushered in the 'ascendency of a new and powerful figure in US culture: the white male as victim'.

The third era, driven by previous currents, found expression in the lead-up to and aftermath of, the 2008 election of US President Barack Obama. The creation of the Tea Party and the Birthers signals a vitriolic incarnation of the white backlash. To some, the election of Obama meant that a quintessential racial 'other' had taken control of a nation for and by whites. Hence, the implicitly racialized rallying cry of the Tea Party is 'Take It Back, Take Our Country Back'. As Adele Stan (2010) wrote: 'While economic insecurity gave the Tea Party movement its *raison d'etre*, its ferocity derives from the complicating factors of race and culture.' The Tea Party has attracted the likes of former Ku Klux Klan member David Duke, and various branches of the Tea Party organization were formed from the Minuteman Project (the anti-immigrant and nativist vigilante organization) (Burghart and Zeskind 2010). The Birther movement echoes the sentiments of the Tea Party through its conflation of whiteness and authentic citizenship that has been challenged by Obama's election. US residents were more likely to associate American symbols with white politicians (e.g. Hillary Clinton) or even white European politicians (e.g. Tony Blair) than with Obama (Devos, Ma, and Gaffud 2008). Simply put, 'Barack Obama did not fit most American's implicit idea of an authentic American' (Dasgupta and Yogeeswaran 2011, 76). It is within this context that the third wave of the white backlash emerged. The repeated mainstream questioning of the legitimacy of Obama's citizenship reflect – and even produce – a sense of political legitimacy and quasi-religious calling endemic to the questioning of how someone deemed 'alien', 'un-American' or simply 'black' could subvert the implicit white supremacist social contract to become president (Mills 1997).

In our contemporary moment of white backlash, many whites now see racism as a win/lose scenario. For example, Norton and Sommers (2011, 215) found that today's white backlash manifests as a set of extensive beliefs held by whites, in which many whites view racism as a 'zero-sum game':

> …decreases in perceived bias against Blacks over the past six decades are associated with increases in perceived bias against Whites.… Moreover, these changes in Whites' conceptions of racism are extreme enough that Whites have now come to view anti-White bias as a bigger societal problem than anti-Black bias.

Such findings echo Hewitt's (2005, 7) contention that 'black progress appeared to be hitched specifically to greater economic struggle and less security for white workers – and with little or no consequences for the white middle class'. The resonance of the white backlash rests upon the reification of two characters: the undeserving non-white recipient

of resources and the unfairly victimized white person. These two characters figure prominently in a sea of scholarship that demonstrates how a rise in black population density results in an increased chance of white racial backlash observed in policy conservatism and voting patterns.

When interviewed in a private setting, many whites will justify their opposition to affirmative action and other policies designed to assist non-white groups. Specifically, many express anger over being made into:

> …scapegoats for all the ills that plague the black community, from high unemployment to the AIDS epidemic…. A common theme in the contemporary literature on race relations is that whites who have misgivings about the established racial agenda and who reject personal responsibility for racial disparities consider themselves unfree to speak their minds, to defend themselves, to be heard. (Kuran 1993, 56)

Matsubayashi and Rocha (2012) also find that the presence of blacks increases antagonistic attitudes among whites towards minorities. However, they find that the effect of the presence of blacks on white antagonism varies sharply by US region and the perception of the level of economic inequality. Specifically, they find that a 'large black population is not necessarily associated with conservative policies when the income disparity between blacks and whites is relatively low' (2012, 611). Hence, a white backlash is more likely when economic resources are perceived to be in the hands of blacks at the exclusion of whites.

The likelihood of a white backlash is also tempered when whites are directly influenced by policies designed to assist non-whites. Perhaps counter-intuitively, Taylor (1995) found that whites who work in organizations that employ affirmative action policies are more supportive of affirmative action than whites who do not work in such firms. In short, whites are more likely to oppose these policies in abstract while they support them when they directly witness race-targeted remedies in organizational settings. Also, Schultz and Maddox (2013) found that whites who believe that one's hard work determines one's success (meritocracy) are more likely to produce 'evaluative backlash toward minorities who make claim of ongoing racial bias' (2013, 346) than those who directly witness anti-black discrimination and prejudice.

Accordingly, whites' abstract opposition to policies, laws and practices designed to favour non-whites and bring about social equality are more likely to fester in spaces of white homogeneity. For example, Voss and Miller (2010) found that American racial conservatism has changed form so that such a one-to-one correspondence between black resource attainment and white backlash voting patterns is no longer tenable. Rather, white backlashes are more likely to occur in spaces of concentrated white homogeneity in a re-segregating country:

> [R]acial conflict no longer centers directly on political or economic forms of competition. The battlefield may have shifted to a struggle over cultural capital, a social recourse in which the segregating white middle class has at least as much at stake at those in more diverse settings. (2010, 73)

Legal cases and media spectacles

The white backlash was allegedly coined in the midst of then Alabama Governor George C. Wallace's 'stand in the schoolhouse door' – an act of public defiance against court-ordered

desegregation of the student body at the University of Alabama on 11 June 1963 (Durr 2003). Media pundits and analysts began to interpret such resistance to civil rights as a manifestation of white workers 'lashing back' (Carter 1995; White 1965). They understood that white workers, when forced to compete with blacks for shrinking recourses, might activate their backlash in the voting booth by opposing legislation designed to assist the non-white underclass or to oppose anti-black discrimination (such as the 1964 repeal of the Rumford Fair Housing Act in California).[1]

Since the 1960s, the growing sentiment of the white backlash can be witnessed in numerous legislative and judicial moments, as well as within select media spectacles. For example, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) was a landmark decision in which the Supreme Court of the United States upheld affirmative action, yet struck down the right of universities to use quotas in their college admission policies. This decision left open challenges to race-based policies under the logic that they were violations of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

In 1988, the 'Americans for Bush' arm of the National Security Political Action Committee (NSPAC) ran a television advertisement in support of Republican George H. W. Bush's run for US President against Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. The advertisement was entitled 'Weekend Passes' and was used to attack Dukakis's previous support of a prison furlough programme[2] by showing a menacing photo of a black convict, William Horton. Some called the advertisement an implicit play of the 'race card' in electoral politics, through the manipulation of white fear of black criminality in particular and an irrational and visceral distrust of black people in general (Kuran 1993, 57; Mendelberg 2001).

Two years later in 1990, an African American candidate named Harvey Gantt challenged incumbent North Carolina Republican Senator Jesse Helms, a white man. Helms's campaign ran a television advertisement that showed a pair of white hands crumpling up a rejection letter, as the narrator voiced: 'You needed that job and you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair? Harvey Gantt says it is.' The advertisement thus appealed to the already implicit biases of white conservative voters (Hughey and Parks 2014).

In 1996, California ballot Proposition 209, also known as the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), was voted into law. It amended the state constitution to prohibit state government institutions from considering race, sex or ethnicity, specifically in the areas of public employment, public contracting or public education. The political campaign to bring the CCRI to the California ballot was initiated by various conservative politicians and academics who opposed affirmative action. Proposition 209 has been the subject of many lawsuits in California courts since its passage (most recently in 2010 and 2012), but has withstood legal scrutiny and remains law.

Grutter v. Bollinger (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) were two landmark cases in which the US Supreme Court both struck down and upheld aspects of the affirmative action admissions policies of the University of Michigan undergraduate and Law School, respectively. In a 6–3 ruling, the court found that the university's point system's 'predetermined point allocations' that awarded twenty points to under-represented minorities' undergraduate applications was unconstitutional, whereas in a 5–4 decision, the same court ruled that the Law School could use a race-conscious admissions process that may favour 'under-represented minority groups' alongside many other factors, as

long as each candidate was evaluated on an individual basis (following its logic *in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978).

In 2006, and on the heels of the previous University of Michigan decisions, a ballot initiative called the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI)[3] was passed into Michigan constitutional law by a 58–42% margin. The initiative, spearheaded by Jennifer Gratz (former plaintiff in *Gratz v. Bollinger* in 2003) and Ward Connerly (former Regent of the University of California and key figure behind California Proposition 209 in 1996), was marketed to Michigan voters as an initiative that would stop programmes from giving 'preferential treatment' based on sex, race or ethnicity. Others claimed that the MCRI was little more than a white backlash against 'all affirmative action policies' thought to unfairly advantage non-whites at the expense of whites.[4]

Fisher v. University of Texas was a cause heard before the US Supreme Court regarding the role of affirmative action in higher education. A white woman named Abigail Fisher applied to the University of Texas at Austin and was denied admission. In 2008, she sued the university and asked that the court declare that the university's race-conscious admissions were inconsistent with *Grutter*, which had in 2003 established that race had an appropriate but limited role in the admissions policies of public universities. While reasserting that any consideration of race must be 'narrowly tailored' with the *Fisher* case, the court did not go on to overrule *Grutter* – a decision that many did not expect, given the recent attacks on affirmative action.

The small yet important challenges to near absolute white racial dominance over the past few centuries have resulted in virulent media attacks on non-whites for being too sensitive and/or wedded to a politically correct form of anti-white racism in its own right. Whether intentional or not, such a white backlash in the media works as an effective political rallying cry for whites who feel their racial privilege slipping in the context of a changing world. By raising the banner of whiteness-under-assault, even mainstream news accounts of demographic changes have been framed in ways that played to whites' racial paranoia. For example, on 17 May 2012 the following three headlines appeared: 'Whites Account for under Half of Births in US' in the *New York Times* (Tavernise 2012); 'Minority Babies Majority in US' in *The Washington Post* (Morello and Mellnik 2012); and 'Minorities are now a Majority of Births' (*USA Today* 2012). Pat Buchannan then picked up on these stories to plug his book *Suicide of a Superpower*, by drawing attention to one of its key chapters 'The End of White America' and claiming that the rising tide of non-whites would unfairly take resources away from hard-working and deserving whites (Buchannan 2012). Bear in mind, these stories were already primed by a rising tide of whites-under-attack stories, like the one that ran on CNN in March 2011, entitled 'Are Whites Racially Oppressed?'. The article began:

> They marched on Washington to reclaim civil rights. They complained of voter intimidation at the polls. They called for ethnic studies programs to promote racial pride. They are, some say, the new face of racial oppression in this nation – and their faces are white.… A growing number of white Americans are acting like a racially oppressed majority. They are adopting the language and protest tactics of an embattled minority group…. (Blake 2011)

Such language carries racial resonance by painting whites as the quintessential racial victims of our day and age, and by blaming Obama and other non-whites as outsiders and intruders bent on oppressing whites.

The backlash and white identity formation

The aforementioned cases and media spectacles together illustrate that white victim narrative is widely shared and carries resonance in diverse registers. Claims of white victimization are, in our post-civil rights era, a dominant feature of our national conversation on race – what anthropologist John Hartigan, Jr. calls the 'sprawling, unwieldy, often maddening means we have developed in the United States for discussing and evaluating what counts as "racial"' (Hartigan 2010, x). In competing to play the victim, many whites vie not just for social sympathy, but for a white badge of courage that marks the battle wounds of systematically unfair treatment and discrimination in a world turned against them.

While it might seem counter-intuitive at first blush, the construction of whiteness as victimized and stigmatized is a dimension of the white racial ideal, or what is called 'hegemonic whiteness' (Hughey 2010, 2012). When a white person erroneously claims to be victimized by racism or racial prejudice and then asserts they endure unjust suffering, that claim can be interpreted as a sign of their supposed dedication, authenticity, and virtue as a conscious white person. Claims to victimization cement an ideal white identity that is honoured and valuable. White subjugation and marginalization are interpreted as signs of a bona fide, committed and principled white person, possessed with the righteous gumption to stand against the supposed anti-white tide of political correctness. Those whites who do not adhere to such an ideology and who fail to perform an identity adequately oppressed and stigmatized, are now more easily coded as inferior and lacking in relation to those whites who have gained this backlash-laded racial consciousness and who supposedly struggle and suffer on behalf of their noble cause (Bonnett 2000, 39).

Increased performances of this white identity of suffering persist, even in the face of mountains of evidence of white privilege and racial inequality that benefits whites. I argue that we should examine such robust and widespread white racial identity work as holding serious potential for social change; the constant evocation of white oppression reflects the sobering possibility that there will soon be a full-scale reversal of hard-won victories for people of colour that will, in turn, further mystify the existence of post-civil rights white supremacy. For instance, many white Americans now interpret social welfare programmes and policies created from the New Deal and the civil rights eras as 'unearned handouts' for people of colour. Ironically, many of these programmes actually give whites enormous and unearned benefits; whites today fare better and reap social benefits at rates that far outpace their non-white counterparts – from income and wealth accumulation, employment rates and competition, health and disease, to police profiling, sentencing and incarceration, educational achievements and outcomes, and home ownership (Attewell and Newman 2010; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Chesler, Lewis, and Crowfoot 2005; Freund 2010; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Pager 2007; Parks and Hughey 2010; Smedley, Stith, and Nelson 2003). If the white-as-victim identity becomes de rigueur and normative, it will have at least a twofold effect: the further social marginalization of people of colour from necessary material and symbolic resources, and the deepening of a class divide that will also negatively affect poor and working-class whites.

Notes

1. The California legislature passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1963 to help end racial discrimination by property owners and landlords who refused to rent or sell their property to 'colored people'. California Proposition 14 was a 1964 ballot proposition that amended the

California state constitution, nullifying the Rumford Fair Housing Act. However, Proposition 14 was later declared unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court in 1966.
2. When Dukakis was governor, William 'Willie' Horton (an African American and convicted felon serving a life sentence for murder) was the beneficiary of a Massachusetts weekend furlough programme, which he used to commit assault, armed robbery and rape.
3. Also called 'Proposal 2' (Michigan 06–2).
4. The law has been challenged many times over recent years and as of December 2013 is up for consideration by the US Supreme Court.

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